DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 342 560 RC 018 512

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TITLE Middle School Dropout Prevention: The STEP Model.
PUB DATE 18 Mar 91
NOTE 13p.; In: Reaching Our Potential: Rural Education in the 90's. Conference Proceedings, Rural Education Symposium (Nashville, TN, March 17-20, 1991); see RC 018 473.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Adolescents; *Dropout Programs; *High Risk Students; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; Middle Schools; *Remedial Mathematics; *Remedial Reading; *Sex Education; *Summer Programs; Work Experience
IDENTIFIERS Middle School Students

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Summer Training and Education Program (STEP) for at-risk students that combines remedial reading and math instruction, education on responsible sexual attitudes and behavior, and work experience. During two consecutive summers, STEP participants receive 90 hours of remedial instruction in reading and math (Practical Academics), attend Life Skills and Opportunities (LSO) for 18 hours, and work for at least 100 hours on the Summer Youth Employment and Training Program (SYETP) jobs. They are paid minimum wage for a full day, 5 days a week for 6 to 8 weeks. During the school year, STEP youth are individually counseled and tutored, and are involved in STEP group activities. A second summer of work and study is guaranteed to successful first-summer completers who stay in school. Practical Academics uses learning models based on relevant themes, individual instruction, and computer assisted instruction. LSO is a standardized curriculum involving lectures, discussions, field trips, role-plays, films, and guest speakers. LSO focuses on preparing students for the world of work and dealing with sexual development, feelings, and behavior. Under the School Year Support component of the program, each participant is assigned an advocate who telephones and meets with the participant at least twice a month. Test results show that students in the 23 STEP sites that began operation in 1990 significantly boosted academic competence during their first summer in STEP. (KS)

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ED342560

NRSSC PRESENTATION
Presenter: Tommy W. Allen
Co-Presenter:
Day: March 18, 1991
Time: 2:45pm- 3:45pm

Middle School Dropout Prevention
The STEP Model

RC018512

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Middle School Dropout Prevention
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Dropping out of school has long been viewed as a serious educational and social problem. By leaving school before graduation, most dropouts severely limit their educational, economic and social well-being. As society moves quickly into an interdependent world economy with a high technology base, there will be less and less demand for unskilled employees. For the United States to be economically competitive and socially cohesive in the 21st century, it is imperative that we educate and develop the talents of all young people.

Currently, one out of every for American students are at-risk of dropping out of school. Dropping out is not an isolated act, but rather a response to, and a consequence of, years of experiences in home, school and community that make dropping out an attractive option compared to the despair of staying in school. Some researchers predict the problem will become worse in the near future because of demographic changes, socioeconomic problems, and increased academic requirements.

Dropouts typically have experienced repeated school failures while drawing limited support for formal education from home or their community. Behind the alarming statistics lie the complex life stories of young people who have given up on one of the primary institutions of our society--their schools and often, their schools have given up on them.

Research and practice indicated that the dropout problem does not begin at the high school level, but rather it is a complex, interconnected set of circumstances that begins with young adolescents. Socioeconomic and school stresses seem to intensify at the middle grade level. It is the multiple messages of rejection that places many middle grade children at risk of dropping out of school. Empirical research and case studies of dropouts highlight the relationship between school practices and students' experiences in relation to their school.

Compared to students who remain in school, dropouts have accumulated a variety of school experiences which undermine their commitment to school. Academically, dropouts have lower grades and lower test scores. They are more likely to be enrolled in general or vocational curricula. Dropouts are also more likely to have been retained in a grade, which can result in their being over-age for their grade placement. They have more reported discipline problems, higher truancy, tardiness, and suspension rates in school, as well as more serious behavior problems outside of school. They are likely to be more dissatisfied with their success in school, feel less satisfied with themselves and their accomplishments in general, and question the relevance of school to their future more than students who are not at risk of dropping out of school. Additionally, dropouts often come from families with lower aspirations for their children.

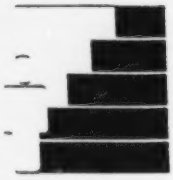
The implication of existing dropout literature is that the process of dropping out is complex and involves the interaction of certain school responses with certain student characteristics resulting in the disengagement of students from their schools. Negative school experiences for at-risk students feed on each other, creating a school environment which presents enormous hurdles for students who are otherwise often without the support needed to cope. Lack of school success and alienation become interconnected symptoms which characterize the experience of the at-risk students.

STEP is an intensive summer program that combines remedial reading and math instruction, education on responsible sexual attitudes and behavior, and work experience. For two consecutive summers students receive the minimum wage over a six-to-eight week period and divide their time between the classroom and the work place.

The first group of students to come through STEP in 1985 cut by half the summer learning losses experienced by a control group that did not combine study with their summer work program. In the second year, the instructional component of the program was strengthened. With a more prescriptive curriculum and experienced teachers providing classroom supervision, the program proved even more successful. Pre and post test scores on the Metropolitan Achievement Test showed the control group registering summer losses of almost a full grade equivalent in reading and half a grade equivalent in math. In contrast, the STEP students eliminated two-thirds of the reading loss and actually made a small gain in math.

During two consecutive summers, STEP participants receive 90 hours of remedial instruction in reading and math (Practical Academics), attend Life Skills, & Opportunities (LSO) for 18 hours, and work for at least 100 hours on the Summer Youth Employment and Training Program (SYETP) jobs. They are paid minimum wage for a full day, five days a week for six to eight weeks. During the school year, STEP youth are individually counseled and tutored, and are involved in STEP group activities. A second summer of work and study is guaranteed to successful first-summer completers who stay in school.

PRACTICAL ACADEMICS



The Practical Academics curriculum is designed to improve the reading and math proficiencies of participants in the Summer Training and Education Program (STEP). The P/PV-designed curriculum prototype enables STEP sites to: 1) tailor instruction to participants' widely varying backgrounds and skill levels; and 2) teach reading and math in the context of issues and topics that are relevant to participants' experiences and interests.

The Practical Academics curriculum prototype has the following key features:

- A comprehensive approach that combines theme-based learning activities with instruction in reading and math. Special attention is given to the thinking processes necessary for responsible functioning in school, on the job and in society. The curriculum specifies instructional outcomes and offers a program that can be matched to the performance levels of individual students (from fourth- to 10th-grade);
- Ninety hours of instruction;
- A 1:15 ratio of instructional staff to students; and
- Daily morning instructional sessions (not exceeding three and one-half hours per day).

Instruction in Practical Academics centers on P/PV-developed learning modules. Each module focuses on several topics related to a specific theme of interest and importance to students. Half of each day's instruction time is dedicated to group instruction on module topics.

In the remaining time, students take part in both group-paced and individually paced activities designed to provide meaningful practice in reading or math. These include computer-assisted instruction (CAI), which should occupy 20 percent of class time; sustained silent reading; and journal-writing.

Since integration of program components is an important goal of STEP, Practical Academics is also designed to complement participants' work experience and the P/PV-developed Life Skills and Opportunities (LSO) curriculum.

The sample weekly schedule in this packet suggests one approach to presenting daily instruction: module instruction or LSO instruction for the first half of the morning, followed by additional activities in the second half. Work experience is confined to the afternoon.

The Learning Modules

The learning modules that form the nucleus of the curriculum connect reading and math instruction with an issue or theme that is of importance and interest to students; each is designed to occupy one or two weeks of instruction. Modules combine teacher-guided instruction (demonstrations and modeling), student-paced practice, and opportunities for supplementary projects, both for individuals and the group. Suggested independent reading and writing assignments are also included. The idea is to build participants' academic skills, life skills and job-readiness skills.

Each theme-based module developed by P/PV consists of self-contained teaching guides that include a lesson script for every topic; applied activity sheets for student use (with answer keys for teachers); copies of required handouts; and suggestions for follow-up projects. The modules reflect a deliberate effort to address higher-order reading and thinking skills, including questioning, predicting, interpreting, making inferences and problem-solving. Activities have the explicit goal of promoting language skills, especially writing.

Initial instruction in each module is suitable for presentation to a class whose members read at an intermediate level, between sixth- and eighth-grade. However, some activities have been developed for students who read at levels as low as fourth-grade or as high as 10th-grade. In addition, some activities are differentiated by the complexity of skills students use and practice.

A teacher who has been through initial staff training can use the learning modules without significant additional development. However, the design allows--in fact, encourages--local staff to refine and strengthen the prototype for application within the framework of their program.

Individual Instruction

Half of instruction time is devoted to individually paced instruction, for which P/PV provides guidelines and detailed planning information; recommended teaching strategies; lists of relevant print materials; software titles and guidelines for CAI; suggested independent projects and journal-writing activities; and suggested selections for sustained silent reading, keyed to the module topics.

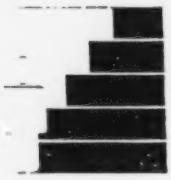
Individual support activities give students an opportunity to practice the reading and math skills modeled in learning modules, and give teachers a chance to tailor instruction to students based on their specific needs. During this part of the schedule, students can work in any areas that need attention, either within or outside the context of the learning module.

The curriculum requires that CAI be an important instructional component--it is recommended that 20 percent of all instructional time be devoted to CAI. Two other required activities--sustained silent reading and journal writing--should represent about 30 to 40 minutes per day. They are designed to help students establish the habits of reading and writing.

Site Responsibilities

P/PV supplies sites with a copy of the Practical Academics curriculum and all student materials, and also conducts training sessions for instructors. Sites must hire a lead teacher, assemble a curriculum planning group, select modules that will be used from available offerings, order complementary instructional materials, hire classroom and CAI instructors, arrange space and computers, send staff to the national training conference and to in-state sessions offered by P/PV, and provide additional on-site training.

LIFE SKILLS AND OPPORTUNITIES



Life Skills and Opportunities (LSO) is an educational program that integrates teens' preparation for future employment with planning for their future families. It focuses on two of the most important responsibilities facing teenagers: (1) preparing for the world of work, and (2) dealing with their sexual and reproductive development, feelings and behaviors. These two important areas of adolescent development are addressed simultaneously because they are closely linked in the lives of young people.

The Problem

We know a great deal about teen sexual behavior and how an unintended teenage pregnancy can affect the future education, employment and economic well-being of young men and women. The following facts provide some perspective on the problem:

- Among young women, pregnancy is the most frequently cited reason for dropping out of school. Only 50 percent of teenage women who give birth before age 18 complete high school, compared with 96 percent of those who have children after age 20.
- Only 70 percent of teenage men who become fathers complete high school, compared with 95 percent of those who did not become parents as teens.
- Teenage mothers earn about half the income of mothers who first give birth in their 20s: women who have their first baby as teenagers work in lower-status occupations, accumulate less work experience, receive lower hourly wages and earn less annually.
- Seventy-one percent of AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) recipients under age 30 had their first child in their teens.

LSO is intended to help teens become more aware of these health, social and, especially, economic implications of early childbearing, so they will be motivated to delay parenthood until after they achieve their educational and vocational goals. At the same time, it is designed to help teens formulate goals and expectations for their futures. Research indicates that goal-oriented teens are more likely than other teens to avoid an early pregnancy, either by delaying sexual involvement or by using contraception effectively and consistently.

The LSO Program

Teens who participate in LSO learn that educational and vocational plans are related to their plans for a family. They also learn more about their sexuality, including societal sex roles and stereotypes; values; how to say "no"; the importance of using contraception if they are sexually active; their relationships with others; and the responsibilities of being a parent. Participating teens practice several skills basic to the program: goal-setting, decision-making, assertiveness and communication. Perhaps most important, teens learn more about themselves--their own strengths, weaknesses, attitudes and values. Such self-awareness, combined with important skill development, may provide the foundation young people need to begin to work toward the realization of their dreams.

The STEP program offers youth a standardized, structured LSO curriculum developed by P/PV and its consultants. The program, which has been received enthusiastically by youth in more than 70 STEP sites, offers twelve 90-minute segments of lectures, discussions, field trips, role-plays, films and guest speakers.

To fit a two-summer sequence of programming, the LSO curriculum is designed in two volumes. Each volume responds to the developmental and informational needs of its specific audience: first-year participants for Volume I and second-summer participants for Volume II. However, the volumes share a common goal, with the second volume expanding on the concepts and skills established in the first.

Volume I includes sessions that focus on personal values, decision-making, sex-role stereotyping, the physiology of sex and contraception, sexual relationships and responsibility. This first-year curriculum also prescribes a visit to a comprehensive health facility that serves adolescents.

Volume II reinforces the themes of Volume I, but gives a greater emphasis to work attitudes and behavior, career exploration, effective communication, and health maintenance.

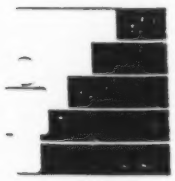
STEP Research Findings

P/PV's research indicates that LSO has a strong, positive impact on participants's sexual knowledge. At the program's end, participants are more knowledgeable about reproduction, the use and availability of contraception, and consequences of adolescent parenthood. In the case of those who are sexually active, some are more likely to use birth control. In addition, females who are not sexually active at program start, delay the onset of sexual activity longer than those not in the program.

Site Responsibilities

Site staff responsibilities include obtaining parental consent for LSO participation, hiring appropriate staff to deliver the curriculum, making logistical arrangements, attending the training provided by P/PV, conducting the classes and monitoring the component. P/PV provides sites with the fully developed LSO curriculum, including copies of the classroom lesson plans, activity sheets and handouts for students. P/PV also trains teachers to deliver the LSO curriculum.

SCHOOL YEAR SUPPORT



The goal of the School Year Support (SYS) component of STEP is to keep youth in school by reinforcing the lessons of the summer and helping youth perform better academically and socially. Under the SYS guidelines, each participant is assigned to an advocate who telephones and meets with him or her at least twice a month. These contacts often involve the participants' parents. Through this system of frequent contact, the advocates identify participants' personal, academic and/or attendance problems and either provide help or connect youth with appropriate support services. This individual contact is supplemented by several group events over the course of the school year.

Implementation

A single organization should be designated to assume overall responsibility for implementation of the SYS component. This organization may be the lead agency, such as the Private Industry Council, or the school district. The designated SYS lead agency hires a coordinator to design SYS activities and supervise the advocates, who may be members of the STEP summer staff, university students, or youth workers from the community.

STEP advocates are often drawn from staff who work with STEP students during the summer program. Some cities have used counselors, LSO instructors, Practical Academics teachers or aides; other cities have recruited interested community members or graduate students in local education, social work or psychology programs.

An advocate's primary role is to maintain regular contact with 10 to 15 youth. In most sites, advocates work about 10 to 15 hours a week, contacting the youth directly and making necessary referrals to special services, such as tutoring or counseling. They also follow up on their referrals and on youth's school progress. In addition, advocates contact parents and work with them to resolve a youth's problems. (Parents are also informed of SYS activities through newsletters and invitations to meetings.) Advocates must document all contacts with the youth for whom they are responsible and must meet regularly with the coordinator to discuss these contacts and any questions or problems that arise.

In addition to holding group activities and social events that bring the youth together to reinforce their affiliation with STEP during the school year, sites should plan some type of regular activity to supplement individual contact between advocates and youth. Activities can include mentoring programs, community service, newsletters, field trips, and LSO programs. Frequently, sites offer several activities during the school year; however, doing so may affect the staffing needs.

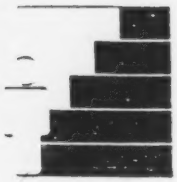
Incentives and Rewards

SYS programs can use incentives to motivate youth to attend school regularly and improve their grades. Youth can earn "points" by improving their grades and attendance, and thereby qualify for such prizes as gift certificates for fast food restaurants, calculators and athletic equipment. The prizes are often donated by businesses in the community.

Site Responsibilities

P/PV helps sites design the SYS component and provides information on how other sites implement their School Year Support programs. Sites are responsible for designing a program, arranging cooperation among relevant agencies, hiring a coordinator and advocates, training staff and providing facilities and other support for the component.

FINDINGS: STEP REPLICATION (1990)



The full STEP model was implemented in 11 sites in 1988, 34 additional sites in 1989, and 23 new sites in 1990. To date, STEP sites have been located in 14 states: California, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas and Washington.

More than 1,331 youth enrolled in the sites beginning operation in 1990, with males outnumbering females (55% vs 45%). About 62 percent of participants were 14 years old on starting the program; the remainder were 15. Youth were drawn from grades seven (20%), eight (62%), nine (16%), and 10 (2%). As in prior years, 1990 replication sites primarily served minorities: 45 percent were black; 28 percent were white; 18 percent were Hispanic; and 9 percent were from other racial/ethnic groups. Thirty-nine percent of the youth said their family received AFDC or other welfare payments.

Over half the enrollees reported having failed and repeated one or more grades in school. On average, they read at about the 5th-grade level--typically three years behind their actual grade level.

IMPROVED READING AND MATH SKILLS

Test results show that students in the STEP sites that began operations in 1990 significantly boosted academic competence during their first summer in STEP. Participants from all seven states with new sites actually raised their levels in reading. Six of the seven states showed gains in math; in the seventh, students "held their own," avoiding summer the learning losses typically experienced by youth in summer.

STUDENTS GAINED LIFE SKILLS KNOWLEDGE

By improving youth's basic academic skills, STEP takes on one of the major factors related to high dropout rates. The life skills component addresses other factors--including adolescent parenthood. The goal of the life skills component is to give youth greater confidence in their ability to make responsible decisions. The classes high-light the consequences of--and suggest constructive alternatives to--sexual activity, teen pregnancy and substance abuse.

While approximately 74 percent of 1989 STEP enrollees reported having had sex before entering the program, many were unable to answer basic questions about life skills issues and birth control. In fact, 23 percent reported having had unprotected sex in the two months prior to enrollment. By the end of the first summer, however, these youth increased their scores on scales that measure levels of contraceptive knowledge and increased their understanding of the consequences of adolescent pregnancy. They continued to gain life skills knowledge during their second summer in STEP.

STEP demonstration research, which will continue through 1993, has been designed to include the long-term follow-up needed to determine whether STEP participation reduces the incidence of teen pregnancy.

FEASIBILITY AND COST

During the past three summers, 68 sites have been successful in adopting the STEP model, which had been developed over the course of a four-year, five-site demonstration effort. Employment and training agencies, school systems and community organizations have collaborated successfully in all sites that have operated STEP to date. Operational arrangements are flexible: STEP has worked well in one or several school districts and has been implemented in cities, towns, urban counties, and rural areas. Classes and work experience have taken place at public schools as well as college campuses.

Compared with most other intensive youth programs, STEP's costs are modest. Most are covered by JTPA and education funds, with wages and basic SYETP administration funded by JTPA. Additional costs for STEP's reading and math instruction and life skills education range from $500 to $600 per summer; school-year support costs are about $350 per enrollee.